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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LAGOS 000310

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/W,

E.O. 12958: DECL: 20 YEARS

TAGS: PGOV NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: MASSOB MEMBERS REFUSED BAIL;

ORGANIZATION'S POSITION UNCHANGED

REF: 2007 LAGOS 00526

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL DONNA BLAIR FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: The federal government July 31 opposed an application for bail for 84 members of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB, a group which advocates independence for Southeastern Nigeria), who are standing trial at the Federal High Court in Enugu on eight counts of treasonable felony. MASSOB's status as an organization is unclear; some view it as a civil society group; others as an out of touch organization nostalgic for a resurgent Southeast; still others as a dangerous organization that threatens Nigeria's integrity. August 28 has been declared a "Stay at Home" day by MASSOB leadership; previous events of this nature have had an impact on economic activity and security in the Southeast. End Summary.

Bail Request Denied for 78 MASSOB Detainees

¶12. (SBU) The federal government July 31 opposed an application for bail for 84 members of Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), who will stand trial at the Federal High Court, Enugu, on eight counts of treasonable felony. Counsel for the MASSOB members claimed the detainees are dying in prison and submitted a consolidated bail request to the court. He argued that the charges against the MASSOB members were speculative and intended only to keep them in prison indefinitely.

¶13. (C) Chuka Obele, who has been MASSOB's attorney since its inception, said it is difficult to give an accurate number of MASSOB members in detention, but estimates the number could be more than 75. There is great federal interest in MASSOB cases, making many courts, especially federal high courts, reluctant to grant any member bail, he stated. Ordinarily, if prosecutors are unable to establish a well-proven accusation against any arrested person, he or she will be granted bail; but this is not the case for suspected MASSOB members, Obele pointed out. (Note: MASSOB claims that 2,000 of its members have been killed by the Nigerian police since 2003, and that 2,000 of its current members are in prison. However, it continues to insist it is a non-violent organization; this is despite violent clashes, including deaths, in previous years that were attributed by MASSOB to infiltrators. End note.)

August 28 Stay-at-Home Day Holds Potential for Violence

¶ 14. (SBU) MASSOB has declared August 28 a stay at home day for its members, to draw international attention to Igbo marginalization. The stay at home day is a yearly event that has seen violence, killing, and crackdowns by the GON.

Police Stymie MASSOB's May March

¶ 15. (SBU) From May 22 to 31, MASSOB members in Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra, Abia and Imo states had planned to stage a walk, called the "all important peaceful Million Man March," across the five states of the Southeast in commemoration of the forty-first anniversary of the creation of Biafra. The march was to have terminated in Okigwe, Imo State, the hometown of Ralph Uwazurike, MASSOB leader. Doubts that security operatives would allow the walk to take place were confirmed when police began patrols. Enugu police patrolled the streets, removing Biafran flags that had been raised by MASSOB members. The local press reported that the police on May 22 raided MASSOB's Enugu Coal Camp, which serves as the group's main meeting venue, but no arrests were made. Sources in Enugu said that, despite this raid, MASSOB members continued to move around the city, distributing Biafran flags to motorists and pedestrians. On May 23, at Abakaliki junction, a large number of MASSOB members were seen walking and distributing the flags; police only arrived at the spot after everyone had left, a trend that was repeated at other locations within the city, sources said. Throughout the

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ten-day period, the city remained calm.

MASSOB Claims Non-Violent Tenets

¶ 16. (C) Obele, who has handled several cases on MASSOB's behalf, told PolSpec July 9 that MASSOB began in 1998; however, it was not until 2002 that Uwazurike held a press conference in Okigwe, in which he announced the formation of the organization. According to Obele, MASSOB was formed to revive the defunct republic of Biafra, which tried to secede from Nigeria in 1967. However, no one took Uwazurike seriously until 2003, when MASSOB began mobilizing the Southeast Igbo-speaking areas of Delta and Rivers States. While Uwazurike publicly advocated independence for Biafra in 2002, he has more recently sought to tone down this stance (ref A), describing MASSOB as a "way to combat continued marginalization of Igbos," and assured Post that MASSOB's goal was to peacefully gain more relevance for the East.

¶ 17. (SBU) While the federal government describes MASSOB as a treasonous entity, Obele described it as a non-registered civil organization. Like any other association, he stated, MASSOB does not need official recognition or registration to exist. This lack of formal registration merely means an organization cannot deal with the government or other government agencies, but does not prevent an association from forming and expressing its constitutionally guaranteed freedom of association, he said.

¶ 18. (C) Currently, there is a leadership vacuum in MASSOB, Obele said, because Uwazurike has not developed the organization; it has no organizational structure or ability to accomplish its goals. Obele said the lack of a well-defined leadership structure partly accounts for the difficulty faced by MASSOB members under arrest, as there is no unified call for their protection. Obele insisted that MASSOB lacks an ideology, which makes it difficult to properly assess it from an ideological standpoint.

¶ 19. (C) Gideon Nwachukwu, Health Secretary and Deputy Leader of MASSOB, told PolOff August 1 that the organization wants the United States, as the world's policeman, to intervene in

the Southeast, preempt further violence, and assist in the independence of Biafra. The people of the Southeast are not happy, Nwachukwu said, and they want the United States to further their independence before any escalation occurs, drawing a parallel between Biafra and Kosovo. Vice President Goodluck Jonathan is colluding with the northern Muslims; the Yoruba and Hausa do not understand the value of human life; and the Igbo are being prevented from living freely, Nwachukwu insisted. If MASSOB were violent, he declared, Biafra would be free already. The problem of the Southeast is the same as that of the Niger Delta, he continued. As the U.N. guarantees any people that want independence the right to be independent, MASSOB would like President Bush to present their request to the United Nations. (Comment: Nwachukwu's ideological demagoguery, while vehement, is not necessarily atypical of the organization or region; his grasp of the complexities of statehood appears to be tenuous at best. End comment.)

MASSOB: Product of Marginalization or Threat to Nigeria?

¶10. (C) Southeast journalists told PolOff and PolSpec June 18 in Owerri, Imo State, that the federal government describes MASSOB as a treasonous organization which must be eliminated.

The GON, they said, has a pattern of overreacting to MASSOB's actions as a way of playing down its effectiveness.

The journalists admitted MASSOB's rhetoric is very militant, but agreed it lacks the ability and capacity to do much beyond talking and the occasional flag distribution. While many people support the idea of an independent Biafra, such sentiment reflects the poverty in the region, the journalists said. Although MASSOB is weak, Nigeria's federation is sufficiently fragile that it too must be protected.

¶11. (C) Comment: Most Nigerians outside of the Igbo dismiss

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the concept of MASSOB, the viability of an independent state of Biafra, and Igbo claims of marginalization. While the Southeast is indeed a poor region, its crumbling infrastructure and poor governance are hardly unique to Nigeria. Whether or not MASSOB is a violent or treacherous organization, it does express many Igbos' frustration with the federal and state governments that do not address development needs of the region. Nigeria went through a very bitter civil war over these issues, the scars of which are still fresh for many Nigerians. End comment.

This cable has been cleared by Embassy Abuja.
BLAIR